

Method in Madness

by Lady Strange

This story was originally written in mid 2004 and posted at Ashwinder. It was my very first attempt at an HG/SS fic. In this fic, Hermione helps Severus recover after the final battle.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

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Method in Madness

Chapter 1

There it was again – that slight pressure of another's hand on his. He knew it was a harbinger to a monologue on her affairs, thoughts, and fears. It had been so far the past few days. He stopped himself in mid-thought. Had it really been a few days? Or was it night? How was it that he had lost track of time? He could not recall if he had gone about his daily duties. Oddly enough, he could not remember discussing any academic matters with his colleagues at Hogwarts. He knew he was still at Hogwarts as the infirmary smelled of the disinfectant that he brewed for Poppy. St Mungo's did not smell faintly of herbs. He tried thinking on the last thing he remembered and then, it dawned on him... He had not been able to recall anything since – since... By Hecate! He had nearly forgot that most of his Hogwarts colleagues and fellow Order members were grievously wounded after the final battle. He wondered how many remained among the living.

Tonks and young Longbottom had perished under the Lestranges. Minerva McGonagall had been severely stunned by three Death eaters' cruciatus curses. Sybil Trelawney had been assaulted with a barrage of curses. Diotima Vector had been killed in the crossfire between the three youngest Messrs Weasley and the two Messrs Crabbe whilst duelling Macnair. Hagrid took a few cruciatus curses from the Dark Lord in his zeal to protect the Boy-who-lived. Moody had lost more than the rest of his nose and Remus Lupin was hit by a hex meant for Dumbledore. And he and Dumbledore were quite drained fighting their way into the Dark Lord's inner circle, fending off the Malfoys and Parkinsons. They had managed to protect Potter until he came face-to-face with the Dark Lord. He remembered being struck by the killing curse as he and Dumbledore strove to protect Potter. At least both the Headmaster and the Potions' Master had the satisfaction of eliminating the Malfoys and Parkinsons before watching Potter make his move.

Potter, he recalled, perished with the Dark Lord when the latter's killing curse met with a blaze of blue light from Potter's probus pyra spell. No, not Potter's spell, he corrected himself. It was a spell that Potter had cast – that was certain. But it had been her creation. It had been her creation tried and tested and after much painstaking research and calculations. She had been the one to point out that Potter's life force and the Dark Lord's were inextricably linked. She had been the one who questioned him on the elements of the wandless magic. She had transfigured a stone into a toad and asked him to cast Avada Kedavra whilst she tried out all her counter curses. Everyone but Dumbledore and he expressed surprised when he effectively deployed it against Nott junior. He could recall the details of the incident. Nott junior had

somehow managed to slip into Hogwarts and had foolishly sought to abduct her from the library. Oh, he could not forget his satisfaction that his apprentice had managed to block and counter the killing curse. The brute did not understand that when a woman says no, she really means no. Certainly, he had been amused by Nott junior's sudden entrance into the Hogwarts library and his paltry attempts to compel her to leave with him. He had nearly started when he realised that the young man was about to cast the killing curse. Oh, he had been there in the restricted section, looking up some obscure books when he was alerted to the noise. His heart glowed with pride as he thought on his apprentice calmly dispatching Nott junior with *probus pyra*. His apprentice had been the one to conceptualise the spell to defeat the killing curse. Before he could indulge in his pride, however, he became aware of a light fluttering on his forehead, the smell of white nettle and a few drops of liquid landing on his face.

"Professor...Professor Snape...Severus...If you can hear me...know you that I will have it soon. I won't give up, I promise. Have faith in me," said a cracked female voice hoarse with tears. "I have to brew some wolfsbane now for Remus now. I'll be back tomorrow. Good night."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

Severus discovers some facts while having an out of body experience

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Chapter 2

He tried moving his hands to inform her that he could hear her, but he found that none of his limbs could move. He tried opening his mouth to speak but he could not so much as utter a sound. "How did I end up in this state?" He asked himself with great irritation. He tried to calculate how long he had been this. He had only become aware of his conscious thoughts recently, within the last five days perhaps. So, he hadn't died and neither had she. Ah, Miss Granger, the only person who came to him daily. The only person in the Order who knew her place was in strategic planning rather than actual combat; the only person in the Order who knew her strengths and stuck to them. She had plotted the strategy, the advances of the attack and had insisted that they each carried a little healing potion. She truly embodied the phrase, "possessing cool intellect under fire". Severus smiled at recollecting her ability to plan the attack just from his reports of Death eater meetings. He stopped in mid-reverie when it occurred to him that he had smiled. Thinking harder, he realised that his spirit could detach itself from his body. Thus, summoning his magical ability to his mind, he soon found himself floating over his lightly breathing body. "Fascinating," he drawled as he stared at his ghost-like hands.

Settling himself in a chair lately occupied by Miss Granger, he realised that his mother's book on out of body experiences were not instances of wizarding folklore after all.

"So, I see you've discovered your *Fissura Anima*," chuckled a familiar old voice, interrupting his analysis of his present situation.

"How can you see me, you meddling old man, if you're still functioning in your body!" spat Severus before snapping his head in the direction of the voice. He was quite unprepared to see Albus Dumbledore's spirit floating next to his.

"Ah, Severus. You are yourself again. The ability to exist dually in body and spirit only occurs in a death situation. You ought to know by now that we are composed of two bodies, a spiritual one and a physical one. Well, my boy, we are in between life and death and can thus exist simultaneously with our physical bodies."

Severus formed a steeple with his hands, taking in this information before addressing Dumbledore, "How is it possible that our sensory abilities are still in tact in this state? Miss Granger had been clutching my hand in a death-like vise. Had I known I would be put to such treatment, I would have rather died!"

"Now, now, behave – your protégé; for she is all yours now that Diotima is dead, is working on a cure for you. Poor Diotima never got over the shock when Miss Granger asked to be put under both your tutelages. Diotima shared your possessive streak when it came to her prize students you know."

"Cure for me? What about you? How long do we have to be thus?" Severus asked wearily.

"I don't like it anymore than you do, Severus. According to Miss Granger, it appears that we have been here for the last three weeks. She informs me that I'm improving in health, but you were almost directly hit by the *Avarda Kedavra* and your system is still in shock. Don't gape at me, my boy, it doesn't suit you, I'd rather you scowl. Miss Granger always came by to see me before spending hours with you. I was worried that you would never come around, but that you are spiritually here, there's hope yet," said the older wizard kindly, placing a hand on Severus's shoulder.

"Isn't Poppy caring for us? For Merlin's sake, she is the mediwitch. Why can't that silly girl be the Gryffindor that she is and mourn for her friends? Or is she as devoid of survivor's guilt as I am?" Severus retorted.

Dumbledore stared at Severus before cautiously answering, "My boy, Poppy's restoratives have been able to work for me and I gather from the feeling in my bones that I would be able to move my limbs soon. But until then, I must 'live' as I am now," he gestured to his ghostly form.

"Don't worry, no one can see us. It's quite amusing you know – I had Minerva telling me that she would ask me to marry her if I recovered. Nothing like an incentive to go on living, eh? But she's busy preparing for the new school year. Miss Granger, however, visits us everyday. She has been working on a cure for you're a cure for your condition after she saw you, shall we say, inanimate."

"Can I help it?" snapped Severus with a scowl, "if she wastes her efforts on me? We are not all as sprightly as you!"

"Is that so?" laughed the older wizard with a twinkle in his eyes. "Explains why I am inundated with so many love letters daily." Noticing his companion twitch his lips in a half smile, Dumbledore added, "She slept on this chair for a week when you were first brought in. She cares a great deal for you, my boy. You ought..."

"It's the respect she wishes to present me for protecting her precious friends as far as we did, nothing more. The silly girl cared more for Potter and young Weasley than an acerbic old man like me," interrupted Severus, clearly uncomfortable with the vein of the conversation.

Dumbledore, however, did not see fit to grasp his hint and merely said, "Is it respect that made her weep over the thought of 'losing' us as well? She's already lost her best friends; let her not lose us as well. We are the only family she has left. Think about it though – I'm off to my body. I'll come by tomorrow if my body has yet to reconcile with my spirit."

Severus's eyes trained onto the curtain when Dumbledore had floated through and frowned. What is that Gryffindor know-it-all up to? And why would she want to help me when I don't even deserve to live? And she cried for me? She must be mad! Mad! He didn't know if he was more incensed with himself for surviving or her attempts to help him. When it finally dawned upon him that it was the former, he buried his head in his hands.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione tries to find a cure for Severus and he tries to help in a none-too-subtle fashion.

A/N: Refer to Author's Notes in Chapter 1

Method in Madness

Chapter 3

From the bottles of magical restorative potions on the nightstand beside his hospital bed, Severus gathered that it was Wednesday morning. He had spent the night sorting out his priorities and decided that he had to return to his office to work on his manuscript of Practical Alchemical Solutions. Knowing full well that he still possessed his faculties and motor functions in his spiritual form, he decided he would endeavour to finish his manuscript in case Hermione failed in her attempts to revive his body. Perhaps there was truth to Nietzsche after all, he thought as he drifted down the dungeons into his private chambers. A powerful wizard like Nietzsche rightly pointed out that what didn't kill one made one stronger. He was in a right mood to finish his manuscript and leave where the know-it-all would find it. He would instruct her to publish it when she failed to reconcile his spirit to his body. Satisfied with his musings, Severus settled into his battered armchair and looked around his chambers. He frowned – evidently; the house-elves had managed to get into his rooms. His papers were neatly arranged on the old desk. His shelves were arranged categorically and his thick grey carpets were clean. Turning his attention from his four-poster bed and its black satin hangings to his desk, he noticed that his books there, were as he had left them and his quills were mended. This was not the work of house-elves. He floated further down to his office which adjoined his private stores and heard the miscreant in his office.

Miss Granger, the culprit, dressed in black, looking younger than her twenty years had a chopstick holding the chignon at the nape of her neck and pronounced her scrawling "plausible, entirely plausible". Severus winced at the thought that he had been patronised by a girl who presumed to know his habits and to get through his wards to his office and chambers. Casting his eyes around the office, he saw a cauldron locked in a stasis charm. Curious, he floated next to it and saw a silvery layer in mid-bubble. The worktable was scattered with ingredients arranged according to their magical properties; the desk next to it was neatly stacked with notes; notes no doubted written in her tight cursive hand. Then, the scratching of her quill caught his attention. He moved next to her, grateful that she was unaware of his presence and peered over her shoulder. He was stunned to come face to face with a section of his manuscript. Miss Granger had been studying his draft chapter on his hypothetical speculations on the treatment of improperly cast Unforgivables. His ire rose when he noticed that she dared to refer to his notes. How dare she look through them when they were incomplete and imperfect! How dare she consult it without his permission! Restraining himself from his desire to snatch his precious manuscript from her left hand, he glanced towards her scribbles. She had been making arithmancy calculations on his hypothetical potions. There was also a list on her right where she crossed off all the failed results of her failed experiments. Severus drew closer to Hermione to see what she had just written and inhaled the scent of white nettle from her hair. He groaned at the memory it evoked, of the days she had spent talking to him at the hospital wing. He had finally associated the scent with the person. He was glad his olfactory functions were normal and with a little sigh, he made the hairs at the back of her neck stand. As she gingerly rubbed her neck, he saw that she had written, "Hellebore root could be used to purge the body of the negative ions in a potion countering secondary exposure to Avarda Kedavra. Calculations prove that it would be advisable to use it in tandem with dragon's bile. Have to find binding agent to render dragon's blood less volatile. S. hinted in notes to chapter 5 it could potentially relieve muscular spasms of a cruciatus. Try at medium heat and 57 counter clockwise revolutions before adding binding agent."

Severus was impressed that the none too subtle Gryffindor had figured out the cryptic teaching behind his working notes. He noticed with a sneer that she had forgotten two important elements in her calculations. She had neglected to catch the scrawl he added on rowan bark and an incantation. "I might as well help myself and be done with her," he mused as he firmly gripped her hand as she was about to put down the quill and guided her into writing, "Remember to use the right incantation and..." Before he could continue, she gasped and he released his grip. Severus immediately recognised his error – he had guided her into writing in his hand. Although her face registered shock, he was impressed that she behaved in a coolly rational manner. She neither panicked nor shrieked like a conventional woman. Severus was proud to see that Miss Granger had a formidable will to accompany her mind. "Very well," he thought, as he saw her briefly calculate the possibility of a being existing outside a human body. Vector had taught her well, just as he had.

He smirked when she sighed at her calculations and uttered, "What am I to do? I'm going mad! Professor Snape, how can help you if I'm like this?"

Putting aside her quill and tracing Severus's spidery handwriting, she felt emboldened enough to venture a weak croak, "Professor, are you here?" Her words resounded in the apparently empty room. "Professor Snape, Severus, tell me not that I'm too late! Are you still alive? Give a sign! Are you on the middle plane between life and death? If you are, don't leave me. I don't want to lose you like I've lost Harry and Ron. Give me a sign, any sign, anything." He obliged her by removing the chopstick from her chignon and moved a stray lock from her face. That proved to be his undoing. As the burst of her shampoo and rich cinnamon scent hit him, she fled out of his office towards the hospital wing with silent tears down her cheek.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione struggles to come to grips that her experiments to cure Severus have met with scant success. She also learns something about Severus's present condition.

For Author's Notes, please refer to Ch 1

Method in Madness

Chapter 4

"Madam Pomfrey!" panted Hermione as she burst into the hospital wing. "Is Professor Snape all right? He's not...." Severus, who had followed her, curled his lips in mild amusement at her inability to pronounce him dead. From the corner of his eye, he scowled as he saw an ethereal Dumbledore approaching him.

"He's the same, dear," came Poppy's even reply.

"Good", thought Severus, "at least my body's not slipped into atrophy."

"It's unlikely," said Dumbledore, reading his thoughts. "The potions kept your body alive, aids blood circulation among other things."

"Headmaster, that's not important now. I think I've upset Miss Granger," declared Severus irritably wringing his hands.

"Oh, I know!" answered Dumbledore. "It's apparent in her reactions. Really now, you ought not be playing such tricks. You're almost as bad as Peeves!"

"I'm *not* like that meddling disruptive creature!" bellowed Severus before he collected himself. "I was merely concerned for myself," he continued in a modulated tone, curling his lip in displeasure.

"Fortunately Miss Granger is not privy to your present vituperation or she might give you a tongue lashing of her own," chuckled Dumbledore. "You know, I felt a tingling in my physical body today. A good omen don't you think?"

Before Severus could issue a witty reply, Madam Pomfrey had closed infirmary door and Hermione scrambled to feverishly feel his pulse and check his breathing. Severus was pleased that the girl was capable of thinking rationally under duress. When Dumbledore saw Hermione's tears, he wagged a finger at Severus in mock disapproval, mouthing the words, "You've made a young lady cry."

Both men were pleased to see her steady her breathing as she sat down, holding on to Severus's hand. "You're not dead! Thank goodness. I know you can hear me. Believe me, I am doing all I can to help you." She brushed away her tears, "Call me silly girl, stupid girl, insufferable know-it-all, give me an acknowledgement of sorts. My hair doesn't come undone on its own; it's too bushy. I've tried; I've really tried. All sixty potions failed to have their desired consistency and effects. I'm not worthy to be your apprentice; I cannot even help you recover! I've lost Professor Vector. I cannot lose another mentor."

Dumbledore bobbed over to her and tried to comfort though he knew she could not feel his hand on her shoulder, Severus was all the more surprised by Hermione's gentle hiccupping tears as she kissed his hand and told his apparently sleeping body that she would be content to allow him to verbally abuse her if he came to. "I promise not to retort anymore. I'll scrub all the cauldrons by hand. I'll catalogue all your samples in your office. I know..." she paused as she shivered slightly in her seat. "You're not here alone are you? You're having an out of body experience, aren't you? Is it one of our other Professors with you? You're a good man with a beautiful soul, a just soul. I greatly like you, rather, I...I esteem you. You're a man who pursues the philosophical virtue of knowledge. A man who thinks like that is not beyond redemption. I've even lost Crookshanks, Professor. I know you do think on me as a thinking human being, give me time and I will find a way to help you. I just want to see you walking about being yourself, taking house points and scowling your asperity at the world. Don't die yet, not yet – if you must, don't be self-destructive. I know your consciousness is awake, sir, professor, Severus. I've proven it by arithmancy. Let me help you, please..."

Severus approached Hermione as Dumbledore floated opposite Hermione as she wiped another onslaught of tears away. He could not deny that having a person shedding tears of concern for him was a novel experience.

"She cannot be serious! Her wits must be diseased!" he uttered to Dumbledore while he moved to stroke her hair. "She doesn't know what she's saying. I'm tainted and she's all goodness. She's being illogical!"

Dumbledore looked askance at his prodigal son and answered, "She will be mad if you don't stop playing tricks on her."

"Tricks?" spat Severus in an icy tone as he moved closer to Dumbledore. "I have never encouraged her or any other female. My forte is potions and perhaps the dark arts, not flirtation."

"She's no longer a child," Dumbledore pointed out. "The two of you are more alike than you know, you stubborn fool!"

"Indeed! She's a hysterical woman who thinks well of me!"

"Clearly," reasoned Dumbledore calmly, "she is not the only hysterical one here. Excuse me, I think one of my limbs is twitching and Poppy has come. I'll speak to you again and soon." With that, he disappeared into the air like a fine mist,

Staring at the spot where Dumbledore had disappeared, Severus weighed his options – ought he make his presence known to the girl? She was a powerful witch to have sensed his spirit. But would it be prudent of him to make his presence known? The silly girl! No, she was not a girl. Her teeth were even, her skin was good and her eyes glowed with compassion and confidence. This was a woman who had the tenacity to take over his duties and look into a cure for him.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I mean, sir, professor," she sniffed still holding onto his hand and pressing it reverently to her lips. "I've become a watering pot. Too much stress and too little sleep and food I suppose. I've been tired these days; these two days especially have been very trying. I must be very tired if my handwriting no longer resembles anything I recognise as mine. They look rather like yours. Could be over wrought nerves you would say. Yes, that's the only rational explanation. I don't remember reading that a Fissura Anima is capable of exerting influence over external worldly circumstances. At least you're hanging on to life. Thank you for letting me know. I am glad you trust me.

"I've figured out how Professor Dumbledore was able to make such a quick bodily recovery. He has a strong will to live. That coupled with the peripheral blast from the killing curse only ensured that he was knocked out for a but. You should take a leaf from his book and have something to live for. You will scold me for my impertinence, but now, I do not care. You, however", her voice trailed off momentarily as she stroked his hair. "It's soft," she sighed. "You are every bit a hero in spirit and intent and I thank you for helping Harry up to the end. You are, in spite of what you think you are, a good man. Ron, Harry and Fudge couldn't see it but I can, as can Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Dumbledore and all the other professors, even Remus. I must get back to work; the stasis charm would be wearing off soon. I'll come again in the evening. Remember, it is not wrong to value life. Sleep well, sweet prince."

He watched her sweep her robes around herself and caught how much thinner her frame had become. She smiled a little at his sleeping form, kissed him on his forehead and promptly left for the dungeons. Severus knew he was dealing with a formidable witch who had gotten into his private stores, broken his wards and genuinely cared for those she considered her friends. If she was so intent on curing him, he would help her. But he could not do so without first consulting Dumbledore on some matters.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

Severus learns more about Hermione and enjoys being between the living and the dead...

For A/N please refer to the A/N in Ch 1

Method in Madness

Chapter 5

As if Dumbledore could sense his presence, he sat up and dismissed Poppy. Severus sat next to him and said enviously in his silky voice, "So, you've your body again."

"Severus," began Dumbledore, stroking his beard. "You wouldn't be pleased to feel your limbs stiff from disuse. Your turn will come soon. If it will make you feel any better, I will tell you now that only I can see you."

"Indeed. And what does it do for me? What good is it? I should be in my office working, researching or conducting an experiment. You gave me the task of putting an end to Lupin's werewolf nonsense or did you forget?" sneered Severus testily.

"There is a time for everything, dear boy," muttered Dumbledore as he put his hand on the younger man's shoulders. "We've already lost half our young charges, we cannot to lose you as well."

Severus started for a brief moment before adopting a quiet air, "I thought we had almost lost you."

"Not yet you and I will die on our terms not anyone else's, remember that. And do what you must, you have my blessing. Mind you, don't frighten anyone who might sense your presence."

"I had better check on Miss Granger then. The silly girl could be emptying my private stores as we speak," replied a weary Severus, drawing a twinkling smile from the indulgent old wizard.

Severus travelled down to his classroom and leaned on his old clerk's desk, trying to understand why he felt a knot in his stomach at Miss Granger's kindness. Insufferable know-it-all! He did not live off compassion. If he met it head on, it would likely kill him. Think rationally, he scolded himself. She was trying to be useful, just as he had when he served in the Order of the Phoenix. He had to find an equilibrium after the Dark Lord's insane and irrational plans of massive destruction. She was now seeking an equilibrium from which she would rebuild her life. She had a mind equal to his own and she dared to contradict him in her apprenticeship that had won his respect. But now, that respect was tinged with something he was unfamiliar with. Before he could analyse the finer points of that emotion, he heard a loud gurgling and an incantation to banish the ineffective potion. He then saw Hermione enter the classroom from his office causing empty vials to shatter as she strode. She was clearly mentally exhausted. She was obviously in a temper and Severus shifted uncomfortably to his seat as she looked around the empty room before settling her eyes on his seat. It was as if she could see right through him and he waited to see what she would say. It intrigued him to know that Gryffindors were capable of violent outbursts.

"Madness!" she screamed at him, or rather, at his seat. Another vial flung itself to the door before exploding.

"What am I doing wrong? Why can't I get it right? Incantation, incantation the incantation must be modified and bound to one of the curses. He's said enough, he wrote it on the parchment!" Cauldrons clattered to the floor before being swept up to bang furiously on the walls. I know he's physically in the infirmary but he's somewhat here, I can feel him in my soul. Severus Snape, what are you doing to me?" she screeched as the cauldrons knocked over the books on his clerk's desk.

"Granger, you dunderhead, you've messed up his classroom!" she laughed hollowly, her veins throbbing on her temples. "Not the books!" She promptly bent down to pick up his books and stacked them neatly on his desk. "Stupid old girl! You've a headache and you've disrespected books. Poor books... Accio headache brew!"

The small potion vial zoomed straight into her outstretched hand. Severus noticed that she did this without the aid of her wand, he smiled inwardly she was proving to be a most interesting student. He realised she couldn't continue to work in this state, he had to do something before she eliminated any trace of his office and chambers.

"You need sleep," said a silky carefully deliberate masculine voice in Hermione's head.

"Maybe I do," she laughed. "Scourgify. Reparo" And the room was clean and everything was in its place one more. "Now, I think I hear his voice. When Harry mentioned hearing voices, I thought he was crazy, and now, I know how he feels...I must be hallucinating. Dead friends, dead parents, dead cat, dead professors and the one thing I cannot have taking turns to haunt me!"

"Go on, little one. Go to bed," the voice whispered in her ear, caressing her cheek.

Seeing that it was the most sensible thing to do given her exhausted state, she plodded back to the office to retrieve her ward before heading off to her apartments. Severus followed, intent on seeing her to her chambers. She stopped at the rooms next to his and uttered her password, "Oubliette." He followed her in and watched her reset her wards.

Her chambers were neat and it struck him that it was decked in mourning colours of black, white and mauve. He settled on her mauve chaise lounge, watching her hang up her robes. So, the Gryffindor has forsaken the colours of red and gold. Her clothes, he could see, were predominantly black and grey; and he had to confess, the colours suited her well. Her curves now visible in her black Victorian day dress drew a lump in his throat. "Circa 1889. She dresses like mother," he thought, pained by the memory of the only woman who let him love her.

Hermione unbuttoned the top two buttons of her basque and lay down on a sofa.

"No," commanded the voice sharply, "to bed." She hastened to her bedroom, which like the rest of her apartments was overflowing with books neatly stacked on cabinets and shelves. Severus watched her smoothen her skirt and sat by her on bed, wanting to soothe away her frowns. He caught sight of two wizarding photographs on her left bed stand; one was a picture of her parents and the other was a picture of the golden trio. She waved sadly back at her parents and gently repressed a sob as the Ron in the photograph stuck out his tongue while Harry tried to flatten his hair. Severus found it telling that the Hermione in the photograph was still intently reading and only popped her head up once in a while to smile indulgently at her friends. He noticed that she had shifted to the right side of the bed and had steadied her breathing. The right bed stand carried a stack of books that was not surprising; even Severus kept certain favourite books by his bed. His attention was caught by her unusual actions. Severus was entranced as he watched her lift a gilt silver photo frame, gently caressing the image. He was stunned to see his pale sallow image curling his lips contemptuously in a half dangerous, half self-deprecatory smirk with a scowl in his eyes. The image seemed to soften its eyes at Hermione but the smirk was firmly etched as it ran its fingers

through its hair.

"Dear me," she whispered at the photograph. "I think I'm unhealthily obsessed with you, so much so that I'm seeing you in so many things. You know what you are and you don't hide it that's wonderful. When will you see that you are not beyond redemption. You are kind in your own way. Perhaps when you're up and about I'll stop this nonsense. I'm your apprentice after all. Good day, love," she yawned, placing a kiss on the image's lips.

Severus kept his eye on the replaced photograph while unconsciously patting Hermione to sleep. How did she manage to acquire a photo? Why did it have a place of honour on her bed stand? He knew, of course, that the Hogwarts staff were obliged to have their photographs taken for the school's yearbook; it was entirely likely that she had asked for one. Or could she have cajoled one from that Creevey boy who was always flashing that obscene light at everyone of importance? The image matched him scowl for scowl and he left Hermione's bedside to sit at her writing desk. There were parchments of arithmancy calculations, formulas for potions to overcome the Unforgiveables and then, a draft of a paper caught his eye. It was a response to his last article in *Ars Chemica* in which he undertook to explain the possibilities of an advanced wolfsbane potion curing werewolves. Her draft suggested what ought to be added to ensure a longer shelf life and she challenged several presuppositions he had laid down. She even documented her notion of the sequence the additional ingredients with a full elucidation of its effectiveness and shortcomings. So, she had attempted the potion on dire wererats and they were cured. Interesting it was promising. Writing a note, he placed it on her right bed stand and left her rooms for the sanctity of his office.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

Dumbledore makes a recovery, providing further impetus for Hermione. However, she will have to learn a few things along the way...

For A/N, refer to A/N in Ch 1

Method in Madness

Chapter 6

There, it was complete. Severus Snape had finished assessing Hermione's latest calculations. She could hold her own in arithmancy and in intellect; there was no doubt of that. If she was capable of such complex equations when exhausted, her reasoning abilities must be doubly enhanced when her faculties are completely clear and awake. She had very innovatively set out to hypothesise that the addition of dragon bile would stabilise the rowan bark abstract. Furthermore, she had chosen to bind part of the incantation for a particularly obscure but powerful healing charm with mandrake juice to prevent the body from experiencing soreness at its prolonged disuse when the body came to. Severus merely added his own hand, "Use the incantation while stirring. I trust you know which one. Thank you. Severus Snape."

* * *

Hermione awoke from a very comforting dream in the early evening. She had dreamt that someone was patting her to sleep while lecturing her on a complicated brew for a counter poison. It was an interesting formula and she resolved to look into its veracity. Sitting herself upright on her bed, she reached over to the right bed stand to consult one of her spell books. In so doing, her fingers found a neatly sealed note addressed to "Miss Hermione Granger". It was in Severus's hand she noted and frowned. How was it possible? She broke the seal and examined its contents, which read:

Dear Miss Granger,

You are not going mad. There is a muggle saying that claims you are not going mad if you think you are already thus. I am still among the living though my spirit has the ability to detach itself from my body. Your only madness is that know-it-all propensity to help others. While I do not approve of such foolish displays, I must own that I am pleased to see some method on this madness of yours. I shall be anxiously awaiting the results of your experiments. Though I am loath to confess it, I am in your debt.

S. Snape.

So, she wasn't hallucinating – he had been communicating with her. Rather, he tried communicating with her. Suddenly, her hands flew to her mouth and her eyes widened in horror as she realised that he witnessed her display before she retired. Waves of embarrassment and shame washed over, he had seen her babbling like a silly girl! At least, he had not made any reference to her behaviour; at least, he knew how to behave like a gentleman. Her analytical mind, however, was not meant to dwell on personal embarrassment. Thus, she quickly laid down the facts before her – she knew that his spirit had only been around for a short while. It was only in the past two days that she could only sense his presence. She needed to clear her mind, so she quickly pulled her hair into a chignon, buttoned up her basque at her slender neck and headed to Severus's office.

She earnestly believed that he would be there reading her notes or brewing a potion. She was so certain that he was there that she could not help her disappointment from escaping her lips when she saw Albus Dumbledore seated at Severus's seat, evidently waiting for her. Albus regarded her with amusement and a twinkling wink as she gaped at him. She advanced slowly and deliberately before running to his open arms and kissing him on the cheek. "Professor Dumbledore!" she squealed, kissing his other cheek. Dumbledore chuckled, pleased with reception.

"Does Professor McGonagall know you've been discharged? When did this happen? How long have you been here?" she asked in one breath, releasing him from her embrace.

"My dear, please call me Albus; we are to be colleagues, you know," he announced, popping a lemon drop into his mouth before offering her the bag.

"I don't quite follow, sir...erhm...Albus," she answered, folding her arms in front of her as Severus was wont to do. "My apprenticeship is only terminated when Professor Snape has assessed my final project, and he's in no condition to..."

"My dear Hermione," began Dumbledore with a raised eyebrow at her Snapesque gesture. "You would want a job when your apprenticeship ends. And since Professor Vector has departed, you would be ideal for the arithmancy position. Your position, Arithmancy Mistress, would be effective with the commencement of the new academic year."

Hermione considered the offer and could barely suppress a joyous grin. "I'd like that very much," she chirped as she crooked a finger reminiscent of Severus, summoning a lemon drop to her hand. "I'll have that lemon drop now if you don't mind."

"Did he teach you that?" Dumbledore enquired, peering at her over his half-moon spectacles.

"Actually," her voice faltered as she mentally steadied herself. "Actually, he did not. Professor Snape's injunctions to me were always to watch and learn. It was the little gestures that mattered because they often went unnoticed amidst foolish wand waving. He also taught that what is unsaid or omitted is more important than what is put before one. It's true..." she added on a faraway, self-reflective voice. "The simplest things often are ignored or unnoticed because we tend to think in an overtly complicated manner. He made that apparent in all his potions classes. He's a good teacher."

Dumbledore eyed her intently and with a knowing smile asked, "And how are your experiments coming along?"

"Oh!" she cried, starting out of her reverie. "My own work should yield results; the calculations prove it and with any luck, we would be able to cure Remus. But I've been remiss in that responsibility, I've been preoccupied with a cure for Severus that I've... Professor Snape, I mean... I'm sorry... My priorities..."

"Are quite right as always, my dear," interjected Dumbledore, indulgently smiling at the stammering young lady. "I'll leave you to work then," he glanced meaningfully at the papers on the desk. "Now that I've seen your reaction, I think I can take these old bones and surprise Minerva."

Hermione couldn't help laughing at the Headmaster and his ability to be young at heart. "I'll apprise you of my progress when I deem fit, sir," she laughed with his twinkling eyes. "Oh, your lemon drops."

"No dear, keep them, you have more on your plate than I do and you need to keep your blood sugar levels up." And with that, he walked out of Severus's office.

Hermione smiled at herself, pleased that there was hope for Severus. If Dumbledore could make a full recovery, so could Severus. Having an incentive to work harder, she seized her notes with renewed vigour. To her surprise, her eyes met with Severus's penmanship.

"He forgot the asphodel powder," she muttered, "Or did he want me to discover it for myself? No matter, even if it takes a month to brew like polyjuice, it would be worth it." Straightening herself, she proceeded to begin her work over the cauldron.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione has a chat with Severus on the finer points on fashion...

For A/N as to why names are the way they are in this story, please refer to A/N in Ch 1.

Method in Madness

Chapter 7

Severus's eyes wandered around his office. Although it was magically charmed to be as bright as the user chose, it was still predominantly in semi-darkness save for the few candles flickering around the worktable and the lamp on the desk. The design of the dungeons was such that it allowed for a moderate degree of light to filter through without damaging some of his more valuable and rare specimens. It also allowed sensitive potions to gently rest in the soft light of his office. He had long been accustomed to the dark for it allowed him to be privy to many things while preserving his anonymity. He was pleasantly surprised to find that Hermione could adjust to the dark so well. Adaptability was a trait he admired and from her work of the last fortnight, it was apparent that Hermione had it aplenty. She had respected his personal space enough to leave his office as it was without adding her personal touch to it. But when he ventured there while she was preparing for her arithmancy classes in her apartments, he was gripped with a sense of emptiness. By Merlin! He realised he had grown accustomed to having her around.

The staff were all a little concerned for Hermione as she almost sealed herself in the dungeons. Everyone but Dumbledore expressed apprehension at her desire to work alone. On her part, Hermione promised to join the staff for dinner at the Great Hall once a week, "so as to let everyone know she was still alive" as Remus had put it. She was grateful that Dumbledore had allowed her to move the arithmancy classroom near the dungeons. In fact, he had shown her a secret passageway linking her classroom and office to the corridors of her chambers.

"What is it Diotima?" asked Hermione when she heard the gentle hoot of her owl. She gently put down her quill and smiled at the creature. "Are you hungry?" she proffered an owl treat. "No?" The owl turned its head to Severus's general direction and hooted before cocking its head at its owner. "Ah, we have a visitor. Off to the owlery to play with your friends," she instructed the owl as she stroked its feathers. Casting its owner a look of curiosity, the owl nibbled Hermione's ear before flying out the door she had just opened.

"You're early today," she said aloud to the room, then adding in an aside, "Minerva should have gotten me a cat." She peered into the cauldron and lowered the flame so that the potion would be gently simmering. "Minerva had to give me an owl when she married Albus. But who am I to say aught if she wants to share her joy with the rest of us? It seems that Albus has a positive effect on her," she muttered. Putting on her robes over her black Victorian styled dress, she got up to leave his office. After resetting his wards, she finally spoke, "You're quiet. I would have gone to see you anyway. Why are you hurrying me today?"

"Because Miss Granger," resounded Severus's purring voice in her head. "I can feel something in my bones."

"That's an improvement and to think you didn't want to try Acupuncture!"

"If you want to catch your death, I have no objections, but I think the Dumbledores might. You could have lit a fire if you wanted to. You shouldn't go without your robes in the dungeons; it's cold," his silky voice chided with stern disapproval.

"Light a fire and spoil your schema of things? Surely, you jest!"

"You shouldn't go without your robes when it's cold," he insisted in a dangerous tone.

"And have it catch fire? You had first hand experience in that!" she retorted.

"Do you intend to be the death of me, Miss Granger? I can assure you that threatening dunderhead students is a more rewarding enterprise," he drawled coolly.

"As we have daily proof," she answered matching his lilting mordant tone. "I don't think I'll frighten the students as you do. It's not a sport."

"Really? Then inform me, Miss Granger, do you think it will do the students any good to see two of their teachers trapped in perpetual mourning? Do you think they will take kindly to two bats?" he questioned as they approached the hospital wing.

"Do you mean one greasy git and a funeral bride? Even if the mourning is a matter of personal choice?" she challenged, unwilling to show her discomfiture with his mocking bantering tone laced in double entendres. She found it interesting that he considered himself in mourning.

"It seems we've both wedded Death. Miss Dickinson did the same when her powers brought unwanted attention to herself, as did Mrs Woolf. It happens that wedding Death is the predilection of particular witches. A case of 'because I could not stop for death, he stopped for me', wouldn't you say silly girl?" he responded before sitting down and watching her greet his body with a peck on the forehead, noting with satisfaction that Poppy had cast daily cleansing spells on him to keep him decent and stubble-free.

"And I thought you were sensible!" she laughed as she grasped his limp hand, gently massaging it. "The logicians are the most feared among philosophers and wizards, but I believe, Professor, your logic is flawed. Surely, your choice in attire is not for the aesthetic purposes of intimidation alone?"

"Certainly not, insufferable girl!" he hissed almost seductively, making her shiver just a little as she reached across to massage his other hand. "When you are in the shadows as often as I am, black becomes a natural colour to mould your own."

"Is that all?" she snorted in an unladylike fashion. "Black, I've learnt, prevents any potion stains on one's clothes from becoming visible; a fitting basque with a good corset encourages good posture, fitting sleeves do not get caught on furniture or in a fire; buttons lend a certain distinction; walking dresses and day dresses are practical. Robes are merely functional in keeping in the warmth and for carrying a wand."

"And your black dresses?" he questioned, floating across to her and brushing aside a stray lock of her hair.

"I wear grey and mauve too," she answered quietly. "What's this?" she exclaimed, releasing his hand and staring intently at a parchment on the nightstand.

"It's a gift. Read it and you'll find out," he purred deliberately, settling beside her, keeping his desire of inhaling the sweet ambrosia of her very much in check. He was pleased when she raised her wand and checked it for spells. He noticed that she kept her wand in a hidden pocket at her skirt. He was delighted that his clever protégé was picking up some of his habits. "Don't you trust me?" he whispered lowly in her mind.

"Seeing how you constantly invade my mind and work, how can I *not* trust you implicitly Severus," she declared resolutely his mind.

"Good, she's learning now to meet me mind-to-mind," Severus mused. "Perhaps I should teach her occlumency and legilimency. There's no one left I care to share my knowledge with – given her natural propensity towards the educational project, teaching her, no, tutoring her, would be a promising endeavour." Noticing the silence, he turned to his long-suffering apprentice to find her eyes glistening with unshed tears, visibly held back. Her hand then moved to gently stroke his sleeping body's hair.

"It's a beautiful poem," she murmured, reading it aloud.

"Weep not for the ones

Who pass in peace

Who reach the end of the journey

Who have lived their lives

Weep not for the ones

Who were torn away too early

Who weep for things lost unfair

Who are trapped in their own woes,

A tear and a prayer for those

Last in their own sorrow

A prayer and a tear to soothe

The pains of the damned."

She smiled at his body before pocketing the note. "*The Oubliette* – what an apt title. Thank you so much, Severus. It's the best gift I've received in a long while."

NOTES:

The poem is my own creation.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

The restorative is administered to Severus. Will he recover? Hermione's dreams seem to have gotten better of her - what does it all mean?

As to why names are the way they are in this story, please refer to A/N in Ch 1.

Method in Madness

Chapter 8

Hermione had been reading the latest issue of *Ars Chemica* to Severus. Poppy had administered the last six hourly dose to Severus and everyone in the castle was in nervous trepidation as to whether it would bring the Potions Master around. The potion had taken nineteen days to stabilise and mature and yesterday, she had finished the potion by adding powdered asphodel root. Once completed and cooled, the draught had to be administered in four doses at six-hour intervals so as to yield optimal results.

She hoped she did everything correctly when she saw his breathing accelerate. If she had been in error, she hoped it would not be a fatal. Hermione was further disturbed by Severus's spiritual absence in the last two days.

Somehow, the dynamics of their professional and personal relationship had changed when he gave her poem. She knew he was aware of her more than friendly concern in him, but he made no mention of it. That poem had open new doors - *The Oubliette* he called it. He was trying to teach her to let go. It was indeed one of the most difficult things to do. In effect, he was telling her what she had been drumming into him ever since he wound up in the infirmary it is not wrong to value life, especially your own. It was funny how a simple poem could evoke the bitterness, guilt, fears and hopes of two people. The poem's meaning was not lost on Hermione far from it she knew that an oubliette was a room that could only be entered from above. It was a room for prisoners and she knew that Severus, like her, was trapped in his own oubliette, unable to forget certain events in his past. Furthermore, she reminded herself, does not 'oublier' mean 'to forget' in French? She ought to have known his poetic abilities; her experiences with Harry in their first year proved that Severus Snape was a skilled poet. Here was a man who was trying to help her see that her friends and family would always be a part of her even though they were no longer physically with her; they would have wanted her to treasure what they had and to move on with her life without forgetting what they were to each other.

Likewise, Severus could not forget the choices of his youth which turned him to the side of the Dark Lord. Even though the Dark Mark had crumbled away at the Dark Lord's demise, leaving behind a faint scar, he still felt guilty for harming and murdering innocents. He had broken his mother's heart and killed her when he joined the Death Eaters. He couldn't forgive himself although he knew his mother would and in all likelihood, already had, wherever she was in that better place. He had told Hermione that much the day after he presented her with the poem. He wanted her to know how tainted and evil he was at his heart and all she said, was "I know, but you must see your soul is the only thing immortal. And you have a noble one, that makes you good." She had framed the poem and hung it in her private sitting room below a muggle photograph she took with her parents before they were killed on the Dark Lord's orders. He was still curious as to how she managed to procure that photograph by her bed stand. Surely, she did not indulge in the foolish notion that there was a little good in almost everyone! If she did, she would be out of her wits. On his part, Severus vowed that he would not besmirch her natural goodness and perfection with his unworthy tainted self. How dare he presume that she would ease his pain! How dare he assume that he was calmer in her presence! What gave him the right to hope when he had been the object of misery to so many innocents! Certainly, the scowling photograph on her bed stand was testament to the fact that she had more than an academic interest in him, but he could not abuse her trust in him. No, he would rather die alone and admire her chastely from a distance than make her an offer. It would not be all that difficult to accomplish after all, he was a Death Eater and a spy, dissembling was second nature to him. Furthermore, they were to be colleagues and he could see her on a daily basis thereby easing the gnawing void he felt when she was not in his office. His mother had brought him up to be a gentleman, and if he had to dine daily at the Great Hall just to see her it would be enough. Perhaps she was still unaware that he knew about the photo and her daily words of affection to it. A part of him wanted the attention directed at himself, but he thought better of it when he realised he would most likely had let fly at her. If he did that, he was sure that all friendly discourse, no, *all* forms of discourse with her would definitely be at end. He would not allow himself to ruin her and torment her with his ill temper; she would not be happy, she's better off talking to that unresponsive photograph. He would use his usual demeanor as his mask of madness to save her from the unworthy creature that he was. Yet, a part of him was aware that there was nothing that could wash away the pain he had already inflicted in her he could see her silent reproach in her eyes whenever she communicated with him.

Severus remembered how happy she was to learn occlumency and legilimency. She had mastered both in the space of the days it had taken the potion to mature. They had bonded because their minds coincided on a multitude of levels. He wryly fought back a smirk at the memory when a sharp headache he experienced informed him that Hermione's potion was working. The potion must be attempting to bind his spirit to his body again.

Both Severus and Hermione were lonely to a certain degree. She had friends but she sometimes felt apart from them owing to different interests. Severus was afraid of allowing people to access his heavily scarred private self because he did not want to be drawn into another mistake. He knew all too well that he was drawn to the Dark Lord because he had allowed Lucius Malfoy to come too close to him. He was also afraid of hurting Hermione, but in light of their occlumency and legilimency lesions, he sensed that she was equally afraid of hurting him. They had traded memories in those lessons, which drew them closer. It was as if they were seeking to soothe each other's uneasy fears, guilt and apprehension because they understood or thought they understood because they had an imagined (or was it genuine) common feeling of pain mingled with hope. It was then that Severus knew Hermione was a mitigating force on his internalised irrational hurt and anger. His concern for the know-it-all inspired the poem and the lesson he was trying to learn. Hermione had told him that learning to let go was as difficult as learning to laugh at one's self. He tried to think on whether he would still have intellectually stimulating and emotionally satisfying conversations with Hermione when his body regained consciousness. Of course he would, he snarled at himself. She was a friend just as Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall were. Before he could analyse the difference in his feelings towards Hermione and the Dumbledores, his headache spun him violently down a vortex pain to a blank dream-like state.

She transfigured a damp cloth to wipe his forehead as she watched his face twist in an agony worse than the effects of the cruciatus curse. Her gestures were absentmindedly executed, for her mind was pondering on Severus's weighty silences of the last two days. However, her attempts to soothe his physical twitching and pain soon exhausted her and she slowly drifted off into slumber.

* * *

She was immediately aware that she was in a dream because the scenes in which she participated had nothing to do with the present reality. Hermione found herself back in her school uniform, attending Severus's lessons. He seemed to want her to answer her questions but he chose not to and offered what could be considered an apologetic disdainful curl of his lips. He asked for her to say behind after class because she had helped Neville Longbottom with his potion. Apparently, he had decided that he would not humiliate her in front of her classmates, for which she was grateful. He lectured her on her maddening desire to help those she considered her friends. She could tell that he was incensed but he kept his contempt perfectly in control. Although he had conceded to her point that Neville would have blown himself up if she had not helped him, he was affronted by her impudence. He had taken offence because she doubted his abilities to be constantly rational. She had told him that he was impulsive and he scowled at her, rising to intimidate her but failing to do so. Then again, she was similarly miffed that he had cast doubt on her ability to answer all his questions. Before she could retort, the scene quickly melted from the potions classroom to her chambers...

Severus was seated by the fire reading a large stack of parchments. He looked as if he had just recovered from an illness. He was paler and more sallow than usual and he was visibly thinner. He made some snide remark about her choice of attire and her extended wand. He was particularly cruel in his questioning. He believed that she was patronising him. He repeated bellowed at her, demanding that she tell him what she wanted from him. He wanted to know why she was kind to him. She wondered how he had gained access to her chambers before reminding herself that it was a dream her dream. She knew enough from her legilimency lessons that the dreamer could in fact control his or her dreams. She made herself sit down and scold him as one would a disobedient child who had disappointed a parent. She told him that she saw him as a form of a syllogism. His life was dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge; it made it all the more admirable and loveable in her mind. He looked at people and he did not see one's gender. He was more concerned with their thought processes. He respected human beings enough to see them as more than gendered packages that babbled incoherently. He was like a philosopher; the most of feared of the philosophers he was a logician who attempted in his manners, teachings, research, notes, reading and learning to replace opinion by knowledge. She told him that she understood his subversive methods she informed him that only true thinkers would try to teach students to acquire knowledge rather than opinions. She told him she knew he was aware of his own sometimes prejudicial opinions, but it had never stopped him from doing what was right. He had not allowed his dislike for Harry to eliminate him, rather he had protected him and he had grudgingly accepted that the boy had more sense than his father and was in fact rather shy and humble. She told him she knew he was aware of certain similarities between himself and Harry they were both isolated and misunderstood. She tried to show Severus that he sought to improve rather than subvert the Order in his activities as a spy and double-agent. She tried telling him that he had a beautiful soul because he was self-reflective and was aware of his own failings. His soul was all the more beautiful because he tried to amend his flaws. She insisted that she wanted nothing more than his friendship; in fact, she would be honoured if he condescended to admit her as a friend. He started and cornered her on the chaise lounge, not allowing her to escape. Hermione panicked a little as she realised that she was losing her ability to steer the direction of her dream. It could only mean that she was dealing with a more experienced legilimens. It was then that she realised she was sharing a dream with Severus in which they were both confronting their doubts of each other.

"Is that all you want, you ridiculous chit? Is that what you really want? Explain the photograph to the right of your bed then!" he snarled, staring unblinkingly into her eyes with malice.

Hermione knew how she must react if she was to preserve her secret. She glared at him, folded her arms and replied coolly, "Your prejudicial preconceived notions are getting the better of you again, Professor Snape."

"You cannot evade my questions, insufferable woman!" he hissed dangerously, turning paler with rage.

"Why would I want to escape from my own chambers?" she retorted. "You are the intruder here, not I. Think rationally, Professor Snape, I know you are a good sort. Albus knows it. Why cannot we discuss this like civilised adults?"

"Don't tell me how good and noble I am, Miss Granger," he drawled lowly. "I demand an explanation as to the photograph. How did you get it?"

"It is none of your business," she spat, escaping from the chaise lounge and hurrying to her bedroom.

"No, you don't! An explanation, Miss Granger, I won't leave until I get one!" he insisted, grabbing her wrist. "How did you get it?"

"If you let go of me and promise to be civil, I will," she said calmly, matching his dangerous glare with one of her own. He released his grip and paced before her while she sat down at the end of the bed. "See, isn't that better?" she said, receiving a snort of derision from him. "As Head Girl, it was my duty to compile the photographs that were to be placed in the school annual. Albus and Minerva thought that a student's selection would be more acceptable to other students. When I finished making my selection, I asked if I could keep some of the rejects. I wanted something to remember all my professors by when I left Hogwarts. Albus thought it was perfectly acceptable."

Unable to look at her in the eye, he abruptly faced his back towards her. "Yes...But why the place of honour?" he questioned in a clipped and evenly modulated tone, gesturing dismissively over his shoulder in the general direction of the photograph before flicking a lock of hair out of his face.

"You kept me inspired," she offered shyly. He turned sharp around on his heels uncertain as to whether she had spoken the truth. "Of all the teachers here, you placed the most emphasis on learning and application. I liked the message you conveyed through your teachings. I can see you for what you are, not the greasy sarcastic git but a man of learning, a true scholar who enjoys reading, writing and researching. I understand the appeal. I can appreciate the solitude. In a way, I tried to emulate you academically. I wanted to be like you, a good teacher doing all the things I enjoy, facing my own research work, reading and the constant learning. I wanted to be like you in that respect so that I could be with you a sense because I know you wouldn't care for a Gryffindor know-it-all who challenges you on every point. You're a scholar and I am ignorant of most of the things you know...you wouldn't have the patience...I...I more than esteem you..."

"Why is it that women never have a handkerchief when they are crying?" he questioned her sharply as he strode over to her and handed her his black silk handkerchief. She was allowing her tears to flow freely down her cheeks and she wasn't so much as making any sobbing sounds. "There, there, Herm...Miss Granger," He whispered, tempted to draw her in his arms to comfort her. Choosing instead to remain as he was, he continued in a gentler tone, "I did not mean to be so harsh. Why don't you get some rest?"

"You weren't supposed to know..." she sobbed aloud. "You weren't supposed to know..." And everything faded to black for the both of them.

Dumbledore and Minerva stood at the foot of the bed watching Severus twitching his limbs and clutching Hermione's hand with his long fingers. Minerva was pained to see tears running down Hermione's cheeks. She clicked her tongue in disapproval at the awkward angle in which her ex-student was sleeping. Hermione had slumped forward in her chair, her head resting next to Severus's arm and one arm dangled off the chair. She raised her wand to transfigure the chair into a cot but was stopped by her husband.

"The angels look peaceful this way," Dumbledore murmured, picking up the copy of *Ars Chemica* from the floor and placing it on the nightstand.

"Our angels, Albus," she corrected sternly. "Our children."

"Quite right, Sweetness, quite right," he rejoined as he charmed Hermione's robes to drape over her like a warm blanket. He then whispered to her sleeping figure, "I've no doubt you've cured him; well done."

"Do you think it wise to leave them like this?" asked his wife

"They are both adults, tired adults they will be quite safe. Poppy will check on them when she's finished examining Remus."

"Do you think it wise? She's walking the grounds with him. There's a full moon tonight, what if the potion doesn't work?" Minerva asked, gripping his arm.

"Sweetness, I have every confidence in Severus and Hermione's work. I know it works. Remus did volunteer you know...he's so sure of Hermione's ability and Severus's notes that he overrode Poppy's decision that he wasn't strong enough to wander about alone. You don't hear any screams do you? Come Sweetness, why don't you take a stroll with me? The enchanted gardens are particularly lovely on a full moon."

"Saucy old man!" giggled Minerva as she gently kissed Severus and Hermione goodnight before leaving the night to work its healing magic on her children.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione panics to find Severus gone when she awakes...interesting events unfold when she barges into the Great Hall...

As to why names are the way they are herein, c/f to the A/N in Ch 1.

Method in Madness

Chapter 9

Hermione stretched against warm cotton sheets and a fluffy herb scented pillow and she slowly opened her eyes. She yawned and stretched again, thinking on the very odd dream she had. She dreamt that Severus had confronted her about the photograph she kept by her bed and she had all but made it clear that she loved him. Still yawning, she sat up and noticed it was dark save for the lone candle by the nightstand. Odd, she thought as she rubbed her eyes, hoping that they were not rheumy. She did not remember going to sleep in her bed.

"Lumos," she muttered, waving her right hand in a sharp flick. The room lit up dimly enabling her to examine her surroundings. She was in the infirmary and she appeared to have been tucked into bed. She peered down to the floor and found her ankle high boots neatly placed beside the bed. The autumn issue of *Ars Chemica* was on the nightstand beside the candle. There was something on top of the journal but she ignored it for the moment and trailed her eyes to her witch's robe, which was neatly draped over the chair beside the bed. She threw over the duvet and hugged the pillow, trying to recall if she had collapsed while brewing a potion. Impossible she was

there, in that chair, reading to Severus when the potion was administered. The pillow smelled faintly of her white nettle shampoo as well as herbs and coal tar soap. She knew that Severus had been asleep on the pillow for his scent was still etched on it. Where was he? She thought frantically, searching for her pocket watch so as to ascertain the time and date. She found her pocket watch resting atop a neatly folded note. Disregarding her earlier desire to ascertain the time, she carefully replaced the pocket watch on top of Ars Chemica and seized the note. It was addressed "For Miss Hermione Granger". She recognised the hand as Severus's and she broke the seal it was another poem. It was untitled, but she did not care, she devoured it all the same, lisping the words lightly on her lips:

"What follows after allure

That never admits its dependency?

Participatory in rejecting exemplars

Marking a modicum in judgement

And failure to recast the dialectic,

It tastes distinctive Sour.

What follows after virtue

That never admits its opposite?

Corresponded to innate goodness

Embryonic in recollecting Forms
Moderating between boastfulness

And conservative self-deprecation,

It tastes distinctive Sweet."

Could these be Severus's last words? The penmanship was his; there was no mistaking it, but the hand was shaky. Was he describing himself in the first stanza? Was he sour over something? Sweet? Who or what was the sweet that he was referring to? Was it a first draft? How did that explain the shaky hand? Severus was always certain of himself, even if he was doing which he knew was wrong, he would make a show of his bravado. He was not one to make a public display of his insecurities. She knew what she had to do. She carefully folded the note with a sign and placed it in her pocket. After fighting back her tears, she cast a quick glance at her pocket, which, if anything, seemed to confirm her worst fears. Quickly, she cast a spell to render herself presentable, pinned the pocket watch in a pocket on her bodice, checked her boots and wand; and she ran out of the hospital wing with only one thought on her mind Where was Severus? If he was dead, there must be a body. If he's dead and her potion failed, where was the body? If he was dead, she would tell him exactly what she thought and she would articulate exactly she felt. It would be easier to tell a corpse that than an inanimate body whose spirit communicated with you. But to reveal that, she needed to find his body and she would bawl herself stupid and tell him everything in private. She would give him some degree of dignity; she knew he didn't like scenes. She would do exactly that but she needed to see the body. The body that belonged to him deserved to know even if it couldn't hear.

The heels of her boots echoed throughout the empty hallways and corridors as she sprinted towards the Great Hall where she knew either Dumbledore or Minerva McGonagall would be in attendance. They would know where Severus's body was; they would know where Madam Pomfrey had done with the body. She was certain they knew.

"Where's Severus?" she demanded insistently in a commanding voice as she entered the Great Hall, her waist length bushy hair bouncing behind her. "Where is Severus?" she repeated, her voice reverberating in the Great Hall. Silence fell when she was heard. All eyes turned to focus on her. The students were already in Hogwarts! The sorting was over and Dumbledore was clearly making the beginning of year announcements. It seemed that her question "Where is Severus" still echoed in the air for students stared and whispered among themselves could it be that mean greasy unapproachable Professor Snape allowed someone to address him by his given name? Hermione fought back a blush, ignored the stares and whispers and scanned the staff table. Finally, she released the breath that she had been unconsciously holding when she saw Severus Snape seated between Professor Sinistra and an empty chair. Meeting Hermione's eyes with studied indifference, he nodded at her, twitched his mouth into a cold half smirk and raised his chalice. Feeling all eyes trained on her, she suppressed a blush when Severus kept his nonchalant gaze on her. Drawing herself up with forced calm, she gave him a weak smile, nodded at Dumbledore before making her way to the staff table.

"As I was saying," said Dumbledore, winking slightly at her under his half-moon spectacles as he continued the announcements. "This year we are pleased to have Professor Lupin as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and that," he paused, gesturing at Hermione, "that is our new Arithmancy teacher, Professor Granger. Mr Filch has reminded me that this is the..."

Dumbledore continued his announcements, oblivious to the fact that the student body's attention fell on the staff table where the scraping of chairs was clearly audible. Severus had drawn himself up to his full height and was frowning. He had transfigured a silvery thick shawl, which drew much admiration from the female students, whom he silenced with a black scowl. Flapping the shawl in a gesture of practised carelessness over his arm, he stood beside the empty seat, waiting for Hermione. To her surprise, Remus Lupin, who was on the other side of the empty seat also stood for her. A little embarrassed by the attention, Hermione quickened her pace and soon reached the empty seat. The barely audible whispers made themselves more urgently felt when Severus glared at her, placed the shawl over the shoulders, drew the empty chair out for her and waited for her to sit before resuming his seat. When Hermione was safely deposited in her seat, Remus saw fit to sit as well. Dumbledore and Minerva looked in their direction and smiled.

"If *all* the teachers are ready?" he said with a laugh and a twinkle in his eyes. "I would like to get through the announcements so that I can eat. Before we begin the feast proper, there are a few other matters. Professor Snape has been awarded the Order of Merlin, first class, for his role in bringing down Voldemort. Owing to his injuries from which he has only recently recovered, the Ministry and I have been unable to present him with this until now." Severus looked uneasy with what he considered was unwarranted attention and bowed a little to the Headmaster when the medal floated towards the younger wizard's dinner plate. While he could ignore the polite applause from the staff and the students of the other houses, Severus cast his eyes downwards at the rapturous applause from the Slytherin table. Unable to bear it any longer, he cast them a dark look and curled his lips with great contempt so as to silence them.

"Now, that we're done with that about time too, I am getting peckish," his comment drew the laughter of the students, a frown from Minerva and a nod from Remus. "Let the feast begin!"

When the welcome feast officially began, Hermione asked the two wizards beside her, "What did you think you were doing, embarrassing me by standing up?"

Remus looked at Severus, somewhat taken aback by Hermione's reaction. Severus kept an impassive face and drawled in his low silky tone, "Gentlemen *always* stand when a lady approaches and when she rises from the table, we must do likewise. It is only...polite. Surely, you are acquainted with this basic etiquette Professor Granger."

Hearing herself addressed in this manner, she wondered whether her experiences in the dream was just that a dream. The Severus Snape before her did not seem like the self-tormented soul who questioned her on the photograph in her chambers. It must have been a dream. Yes, it was nothing more than a dream. If he could regard her with such formality, he did not know how she felt or he would have surely ignored her. She turned to look Severus in the eye, "It's very nice of you, I'm sure, *Professor Snape* but I would not want to trespass on your kindness," retorted Hermione in kind, biting into a sandwich.

"Snape, you've mangled yet another compliment," sighed Remus. "We were trying to be nice, really we were. You've completed your apprenticeship, Hermione. Snape decided that your Adapted Wolfsbane potion and your Counter Restorative to the killing curse warranted 'extraordinarily outstanding' He's very pleased, even if he doesn't show it."

"There you go, Lupin, puffing her up with notions of her importance!" he scowled, summoning a pitcher to pour some pumpkin juice into Hermione's chalice. "If she had sense enough, she would have worn her robes and not give me the trouble of transfiguring a shawl out of thin air for her! See," he said lowly, with a triumphant look in his eyes as he grasped her palm. "Her appendages are cold! Senseless woman!"

"Never mind *him*, Remus" said Hermione, struggling free from his loose grip. '*Professor Snape* may know how to be a gentleman but he certainly is renowned for the species' qualities. Still, that's gallantry for you. I'm glad it isn't dead," she laughed in an ironic tone. "Are you really recovered Remus? No side effects? No howling at the moon? Any ravenous appetite for rare steak?"

Remus shook his head with a broad grin when he caught Severus's characteristic scowl. "I took a moonlit stroll under Poppy's watchful eye, of course. You should have seen the full moon, Hermione; it was lovely last night. Perhaps you should patent your Adapted Wolfsbane cure," he paused, noticing Severus swearing under his breath as he placed a large piece of shepherd's pie on Hermione's plate. Realising that he meant to continue, Remus hastily added, "that is, if Snape will allow it. What say you, old boy?"

Severus glared at Lupin as if insulted by his colleague's suggestion. "I do not recall being on such intimate terms with you, Lupin! Leave our tenuous friendship with some degree of dignity," he cautioned in a dangerous voice. "I would not dream of trespassing on Miss Granger's work or *kindness*. If Herm..., Miss Granger would consent to nourish herself so as not to die before we have articles for publication on both her successes; the formula for the Adapted Wolfsbane potion would be made available to those afflicted."

"They are your successes as much as mine; besides, *I* am eating," declared Hermione indignantly as she watched him summon a few slices of ham and chicken for the three of them.

"A sandwich is not food!" insisted Severus between his teeth, causing Remus to laugh. "I am only repaying the favour Professor Granger. You have condescended to prolong my life and I'm presently engaged in doing the same for you. And Merlin knows Remus could use some ham with all that gravy, otherwise, he'll make a right mess of himself!"

Remus laughed at the comment and Severus glared before continuing, "If you don't eat and you faint or waste away, whichever occurs first your precious dunderheads would miss their lessons. You wouldn't want that to happen now, would you?"

"I don't see you eating!" responded Hermione, jabbing Severus's empty plate with her finger.

Severus looked to Remus who gave him an expression of 'I don't know what to do, I would love to help but you're on your own'. He scowled at the unhelpful wizard and heard a laugh from Professor Sinistra. Deciding that he would have to act, he picked up his fork and knife and surgically extricated a mouthful of shepherd's pie with a piece of ham, put it before Hermione and taunted her in a low purr, "Only if the lady eats first, otherwise, I dare not."

Uncertain as to how she should react, she turned to Remus to find him carefully examining Severus's Order of Merlin medal. Severus met her gaze unflinchingly, still holding onto the fork in a firm but careless manner, he asked, "Well?"

Hermione knew there was no way out of this; she would have to accept the fork. She reached out to take the fork, but as her fingers touched his, he muttered, "No, silly girl! Open your mouth, take in the food and masticate!"

Tightening the shawl around her, she did so and glared at him. "Presumptuous snarky devil!" she hissed while chewing.

"Manners, Professor Granger. Don't talk with you mouth full," he said smoothly as he fed himself with a little something from her plate.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked when he realised what he had done.

"Eating, Miss Know-it-all Gryffindor!" he replied. He positioned the fork at her mouth again, "You are going to eat, you silly girl, even if I have to feed you *this* will not last, understand?" he paused before adding in a sterner voice, "I am not used to cossetting any one."

Knowing she couldn't win the argument, she allowed him to feed him and challenged, "Why aren't you eating from your own plate?"

"You're the insufferable know-it-all; you tell me."

"Are you trying to save the house-elves from too much cleaning?" she asked, accepting another mouthful from him.

"You disappoint me. Eating off another's plate in some cultures is a mark of respect. I think I owe you that much after what you have done. Even if that blasted brew gave me a nasty headache!" he answered quietly, smirking a little at her.

Remus rolled his eyes at Severus's pathetic excuse of a smile before whispering in Hermione's ear, "In some cultures, eating off the plate of one's beloved is a sign of affection."

When Hermione turned around to face Remus, he was busy talking to Madam Hooch. She must have imagined Remus's whisper then. Oh well, no matter, Severus was up and about and appeared to be his usual self. Everything would return to normal, she was sure of it. Thankfully, no one seemed aware of what the two of them were doing, she imagined that it would provide great gossip fodder for the students. As she took another bite from Severus's proffered fork, she did not notice Remus and Dumbledore smile knowingly at this particularly domestic scene.

NOTES:

Once again, the poem is my creation.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

A final fling at madness. Hermione finds an 'intruder' in her chambers who is waiting to 'interrogate' her. The final chapter to this tale.

Method in Madness

Chapter 10

It was almost three o'clock on a Saturday morning when Hermione left the library to return to her chambers. It had been five months since she became a Hogwarts Professor and she was still amazed by the audacity of some students. She was amazed that despite the unseemly hour, she had to break up several couples along the dark corridors from the library to the main stairwell leading to the dungeons. She now knew why Severus always caught students engaging in less than academic pursuits the late hour and the deserted stretch from the library to the dungeons advertised their suitability for trysts. At least it was Saturday, she thought, she would be able to sleep in and finish drafting her research proposal later in the day. Thankfully, *Ars Chemica* had accepted the article on the Advanced Wolfsbane potion Severus had written with her; she expected a copy of the journal by owl anytime soon, she was glad that it gave her something to look forward to. She potted down the corridor to her rooms, gingerly rubbing her neck in mental exhaustion. Then, it struck her she was at the door outside her chambers and she could not feel the prickling of her wards. The gargoyle guarding her door had been shifted; that meant someone had deciphered her password; in all likelihood, that someone was still in her apartments.

Tightly grasping her wand, she entered her rooms unprepared for the sight that greeted her. Her chambers were dimly lit and the hearth was still cold. A wizard's robe of deep midnight black hung neatly on the hat stand at the door, smelling mildly of herbs and a potion residue. The owner of that robe was stretched out very comfortably and causally on the chaise lounge perusing what appeared to be his manuscript. Hearing her approach the pale personage hooked a lock of hair behind his ear and enquired after her night.

"What are you doing here Professor Snape?" she asked in a voice quaking with anger. "Do you know the word 'privacy'?"

"You really should change your password, Hermione," he responded. "You missed dinner, are you trying to kill yourself through starvation? There are easier ways to die, you could have asked me. It's late, where were you?"

"Come now Severus," she snorted. "Are you so desolate without my company that you stoop to enquire so impertinently in my affairs?"

"It is not my impertinence but yours. You have seen my manuscript in all its imperfections and your marks are all over it. I am honour bound to make this work a collaborative effort even though it galls me to see that it will no longer be mine alone. I am a possessive man, you should know that by now," he snapped. "Put that away," he added, gesturing to her wand. "You could hurt yourself with your foolish wand waving. I'm in no mood to administer a potion to you should that occur!" She approached him cautiously like a panther stalking her prey, he thought, clearly entranced by her movements.

Satisfied that she was indeed conversing with Severus Snape after a brief glimpse at his potion stained fingers, she put her robe in the laundry basket and pocketed her wand. She studied his tall frame stretched on her chaise lounge and she had a sense of déjà vu. She could not place where she had seen this scene but she did not allow that to bother her, she walked over to him, smiled fondly at him in an absentminded manner and wrinkled her nose. She could smell alcohol on him, not much, but faint enough to suggest that he had been drinking. Sitting down on the rug next to the chaise, she leaned forward, placed her hands on the chaise, looked up at him and asked kindly, "Are you drunk?"

He smirked as he turned to face her retorting, "Are you so desolate without *my company*, Professor Granger, that you stoop to enquire so impertinently after *my* affairs?"

She folded her arms on the chaise and laughed uncomfortably before resting her head on her arms and replying calmly, "I repeat, Severus Snape Are You Drunk?"

"Yes, very much so," he answered with a note of truthfulness as he stared into her chocolate eyes. Then he rearranged his face into a scowl.

"Good!" she laughed. "It means you're not." She paused, noticing that he had moved the photograph she usually kept on her right bed stand to the small book table beside the chaise. "Are you still sore about not getting the Defence of the Dark Arts position?"

"Among other things," he said sullenly, summoning the silver shawl to serve as a cushion for him.

"Professor Dumbledore had considered giving you the position when you were in the infirmary but he decided against it because you cannot be replaced as Potions Master. Don't you see, you are so terribly good at what you do that Albus is hard pressed to find someone of your calibre to replace you. You are too good to be replaced. You have set an incredible standard for your students and your successor" she reasoned, taking his hands and examining them. "What did you brew today? Responsum unctio for Professor Sprout? Your hands are stained."

"They've been stained with a lot more," he snarled without making the least effort to snatch away his hands. He was rather comfortable to watch her trace her fingers on the stains.

"But now it's just potions that stain them, not blood. You have everything in your future to look forward to. You'll write another book that will be all yours and the academic wizarding world would value you all the more. It's too early in the morning for a fight. Why don't you return to your rooms and rest? I promise to be more responsive to insults and death threats later in the afternoon."

"I'm not a child," he complained quietly as she got up and kissed him on the cheek. Suddenly, all his vows of protecting her from himself vanished and he pulled her down to sit with him on the chaise. "But that does not mean I'm unresponsive to the pins you stick in me."

She stared at him, tempted to give him a good shake up to knock some commonsense into him. However, Hermione knew his violent streak and strained himself. "There are no lasting side effects to Counter Restorative to the killing curse. What is this about?"

"You once told me you esteemed me. Does that still hold true?" he asked with desperation in his eyes. She smiled without shame or embarrassment and nodded before patting his hands gently. He took that as a sign to lace his fingers with hers, encouraged by the fact that she did not seem repelled by him. He continued, "For my faults or in spite of them?"

She laughed uncomfortably and freed her hands. "What is the purpose of this interview?"

"I know about the photograph," he said quietly, wrapping the shawl around her shoulders. "You'll catch your death, dunderhead."

"Explains why you moved it," she muttered, unconsciously drawing the shawl closer to her. "You want an explanation but I cannot give you a simple one. It's late; we're both tired and if we go on talking, we will argue and wake the castle up. The ill temper of two bats must not be borne. Can't you leave it at the fact that I respect you?" she pleaded tiredly, her eyes not revealing her inner turmoil and panic.

Severus watched her expression and inwardly smiled. Good, he had taught her well, she is able to keep her emotions from showing on her face. "I have long been acquainted with the reasons and how you acquired it."

Hermione's eyes and mouth widened momentarily before she caught herself and lowered her eyes. So he knew! The sneaky bastard! The audacity of the man to invade her chambers and her dreams... That's it her dream in the infirmary he had used legilimency to divine the truth about the photograph. It's too late now, she thought. She might as well apologise and be over and done with it, thus she said quickly in one breath, "I know you're likely offended, but it wasn't my intention that you should find out. I understand if you think my sentiments abhorrent. I have no right to feel like a silly schoolgirl when you've shown no more than a friendly concern in my welfare. I keep the image of the man I love near me so that I can face him daily till the end of my days. I am mourning for more than my parents and my friends. I already consider myself his widow. I don't think affection settles well with you."

"Well, yes, that could be true," he smirked and lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "I was shocked; you feel insulted that I've invaded your mind, I am sorry. But curiosity is a dangerous snare for us academics. Answer my question Hermione, for my faults or in spite of them?"

"Is that so important? Haven't I humiliated myself enough? I only do it once a day. Try again on Sunday!" she spat bitterly.

"Answer me, Hermione, I need to know," he pleaded. "At least before I do something stupid."

"For everything that you were, are and will be. I am...excessively...fond of you," she pronounced slowly, anxiety etched in her mind. She wondered what he was playing at; whatever it was, she only hoped that she would come out of it without losing her temper or his friendship. She wanted to tell him that she adored him but thought against it lest he storm out of her chambers and her life. No, she was Severus Snape's student and she could play this game.

He stiffened, as if he could read her mind, "In what sense?"

"As a one time mentor, a friend and..." she allowed her voice to trail, uncertain whether she should continue.

"And colleague?" he whispered.

She heaved a sigh of relief and felt the colour returning to her cheeks. She nodded dumbly, offering a weak smile.

"It seems Hermione, Miss...Professor Granger," he slowly drawled, his face an impassive mask once more. "I was right in this matter; I apologise for taking your time, I was labouring under a flawed notion. I have failed to recast the dialectic and the aftertaste is sour." He moved to raise her hand to his lips but she stopped him

"That was from your second poem. 'And failure to recast the dialectic / It tastes distinctive - Sour'. What an insufferable know-it-all I was that I didn't see it!" she laughed hollowly, then continued to recite the second stanza:

"What follows after virtue

That never admits its opposite?

Corresponded to innate goodness

Embryonic in recollecting Forms

Moderating between boastfulness

And conservative self-deprecation,

It tastes distinctive Sweet."

"You memorised it!" he exclaimed with astonishment.

"Yes, I liked it better than *The Oubliette*. You have admitted your dependency on another and it made you uncomfortable, hence sour. But you could see that if you learnt to let go and see yourself for what you are, with your innate virtue for knowledge, you and I could do a world of good for ourselves and each other. I understand now, Severus! To think that you were dropping hints all the time the poems, the sorting feast, arranging it so that we always chaperoned students to Hogsmead, escorting me to quidditch matches, a first edition of Arcane Potions and drafts, waiting for me at the library...To think that I wanted to grab you in between the shelves..." she cried, holding on tightly to his hand, her eyes moistening with unshed tears of realisation and joy.

"You have always been too good for me. I feel as if I have known you for years, yet I don't feel worthy of you," he mumbled shifting his weight from one foot to another. "I thought I had made myself explicit, but you didn't give me a sign. I thought you perceived my hints as unsavoury. I am capable of some form of affection, albeit, in the manner of us greasy gits and over grown bats."

Hermione could only stare at him as he kneeled in front of her to gently wipe away the tears before he reached in to embrace her. "So, I'm not too late after all," she laughed kissing him chastely on the lips.

"I thought that was supposed to be my line?" he responded evenly, trying to tease her. "You think I like the way students look at you? And even though I know Lupin has Sinistra, I don't particularly like the way he hovers about you. I was worried that you were already spoken for. If only I had asked!"

"What a fool / have been? I should have followed Minerva's suit and asked you to marry me!" she said, frowning at herself.

He looked at her and saw that she was utterly serious. Why disappoint her? He should let her know the truth. "That can be arranged if you so desire. We can conjure a walkway through the wall linking our rooms, we can maintain both our living quarters and our individual privacy should we need it," he answered in a low purr.

"Don't be a tease!"

"No, seriously Dearest, do you know what date it is today?"

"Saturday, the twenty-ninth of February," she answered slowly, fully aware of his suggestion and its unspoken implication. "Are you mad? I don't even know if you're the sort!"

"We are but mad north-north west because there is method in this madness. As for whether I am suitable, ask Death; you and I have been married to Death; you know what sort I am," he offered playfully while maintaining a scowl.

She fell silent for a moment as she considered the gravity of the matter. "You do realise I won't take your name when I'm teaching."

He nodded and told her, "You do realise I am not one for public displays."

Hermione nodded with a light smile and considered her options. She weighed both sides of the grave situation; either way she wouldn't lose out. It was a win-win situation both ways. If he agreed, it would suit her and if he didn't, she would get new robes, a hat and gloves. Deciding that it was a calculated risk worth taking, she quickly asked while holding her breath, "The proposition is on the table now, will you take it?"

"In all earnestness?" he asked and she nodded, holding her breath. He took a deep breath, paled a little and hoped that it was not a prank worthy of Peeves, he replied without hesitation, "Yes."

"Do you want a cushion for your knees?" she asked shyly when the magnitude of what they had agreed to sunk in.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he growled. "The ground is harder than I remembered. How did you figure out?"

"Simple, my dear Severus," she said smiling at his mock grimace. "I know you better than you know yourself."

Sitting down beside her on the chaise, he huskily said in his deliberate drawl, "I must have done something good to deserve you. I only hope that I continue to endeavour to deserve you." And with that, he finally sealed their promise with a long searching kiss.

Finis

NOTES: It is believed that on February 29th, single women can ask men to marry them. If the men refuse, then they must purchase some article of clothing for the women's whose proposals they refused.